

Networks

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Video Graphics Meet the Computer Age

"Using the computer to create art is seen as a humanizing use of a very scary technology."

David Ross, Assistant Director for Collections and Programs, University Art Museum

At the applied science fiction extreme of the video continuum, a handful of local artists explore the creation of video images without the benefit of a camera.

Among them are video synthesis pioneers Stephen Beck, and Louise and Bill Etra, who recently emigrated from New York. Both Beck and the Etras are responsible for developing devices that take advantage of computer technology to bypass video cameras and put an electronically-generated picture on the screen.

Bill Etra and Beck have spent the better part of this decade building, rebuilding and improving video synthesizers. Etra worked at the WNET TV Lab where he was introduced to the Paik-Abbe synthesizer and went on to collaborate with Steve Rutt on the Rutt-Etra Synthesizer. Now he is modifying his own computer video graphics system for production by a local home computer manufacturer. Beck worked at the West

Coast corollary of the TV Lab, the National Center for Experimental Television, and designed his Direct Video Synthesizer, which he anticipates will also lead to a consumer product spinoff.

Neither, however, started out with the idea of building tools or toys for the America of the 1980s. "When you're a toolmaker you have to give up time that you might spend using the tools," Bill Etra said, "I could have spent the rest of my life using the Rutt-Etra Synthesizer and never played out the possibilities."

It was not so much a fascination with the technology that kept the Etras and Beck plugging away and plowing money into their machines, as it was the possibility of a new immediate and responsive form of self-expression.

Beck, who began with hopes of relieving the monotony of the millions of American tv sets, said, "Television emphasizes the real world, the world you can see with your eyes open, and to me that's only half the world. The world you can see with your eyes open is like working with a camera; what you see with your eyes closed is like working with a synthesizer."

The unique properties of the video image, coupled with speedy computer manipulation seem almost seductive to the artist. The vibrant and luminous colors are transmitted rather than reflected

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CPBC Funds BAVC

On May 12, the California Public Broadcasting Commission voted to add its support to the Bay Area Video Coalition's *Western Exposure* series of independently produced programs for public television. The commission's \$25,000 grant will go to California public tv stations to pay for post-production services and step-ups for the *Western Exposure* segments. With the CPBC grant, \$30,000 in production funds from the recent Rockefeller grant to the BAVC and other pending funds, we can now look forward to moving six projects into production this summer.

The projects were chosen from more than 50 proposals submitted by local producers. Panels met in October and March to review the proposals and look at tape samples.

Panelists were Lawrence Andrews, BAVC Chairperson; Burt Arnowitz, of KPIX's *Evening*; independent producer Wendy Blair; Arthur Ginsberg, *Western Exposure* project director; Martha Glesing, Executive Producer of KQED's *Turnabout*; Bob Klein, producer at KPIX; Don Roman, Executive Producer of local programming at KQED; Juana Samayoa, public affairs producer at KBHK; Gail Waldron, BAVC Executive Director.

The two panels recommended a total of 14 projects for BAVC support. Since so far we have not been able to raise the total \$250,000 estimated necessary to produce all 14, some of the projects will remain simmering and fundraising on the back burner.

The following programs are in the first wave, targeted for airing late 1978:

"Whither Locke," Todd Carrell, *continued on page three*



Bill and Louise Etra work in their Oakland studio.

Video Graphics: This Does Compute

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light. "I'm seeing colors on tv that I've never seen before," Louise said, "it's like someone introducing a whole new line of Grumbacher's paints."

(The Etra's system has a range of about 65,000 hues, including rich browns which Bill considers a special achievement.)

The ability to combine taped scenes from the "real world" with abstract rhythms of color allows for images of dreamlike, or perhaps nightmarish, quality. The motion of brilliant colors sweeping, sparking, flashing and flickering on the screen can produce breathtakingly evocative segments, if controlled and well-conceived.

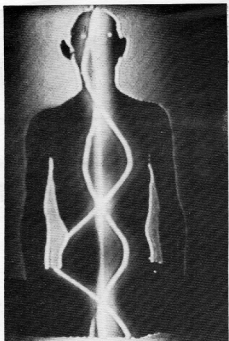
But the efforts don't always succeed and critics are quick to label synthesized video boring or frivolous, wasteful and self-indulgent. The artists we talked with were sensitive to such criticism, if not defensive.

Bill Etra pointed out that they did their Video Wallpaper in 1973 and left it behind. "We don't do the sort of tape which is just striking images...there's more of an object to it." He added that he doesn't tape any effects that he doesn't know how to control and repeat.

Approaching computer graphics as research and development, anyone can see the trickle down has begun already. Synthesized graphics are making their appearance on television in the form of network logos and advertising gimmicks. Rock music performance programs make persistent, if not terribly imaginative, use of simple special effects once pioneered by video artists.

Graphic artist Damon Rarig conceived and designed visuals for KQED's *Over Easy* series using the most sophisticated computer graphics system available, at Xerox's Palo Alto research center. Rarig is sold on the system as a design tool, which allows him to quickly make a rendering displayed on a video monitor, then adjust position or size of the elements and even change the color scheme after the image is created. Once Rarig is satisfied with a design, he can order it up on videotape or paper to present it to the show's producer.

Seen in another light, perhaps this genre of what Beck calls expanded video will become for the generation weaned on *Sesame Street* and *Electric Company* what mirrors and crystals, stained glass windows and gilded icons were for their predecessors.



Stills from Stephen Beck's "Union." © 1977

In any event, Bill Etra argues for a stay of judgement. Music, he says, has been evolving over the centuries and this new medium with new sensibilities needs time. Of the Etras work he said, "I think of it as whistling tunes, little folk melodies, and somewhere down the line we'll produce our great operatic *magnum opus*, but we've only been at it for nine years and that's not enough practice to create an opera."

SF Library: You Don't Have to Read

From the moment you step inside the door at 3150 Sacramento Street, you know this is no ordinary library. A librarian criss-crosses the shelf-lined room wearing wireless headphones. Behind the checkout desk there are stacks of video and audio playback equipment, and on your way to the children's room you'll pass an Advent Videobeam screen. Half the shelves are filled with brightly-colored plastic talking book containers rather than conventional books.

This is the SF Public Library Communications Center. A successor to the California Video Resource Project, the center was founded to make it easier for print-disabled and audio-impaired residents to use the municipal library. The 9,000 or so volumes of non-print material (talking books, video, audio cassettes, film) have been brought out of the Main Library basement and put within easy reach of the patrons.

Downstairs in the center office, there is a production center, under the direction of Roberto Esteves. The center staff makes audio cassettes (like taped copies

Bean Sprouts: One Down

The Children's Television Project recently previewed the first segment of *Bean Sprouts*, a series about Chinese-American kids being produced under a \$300,000 Emergency School Aid Act grant from HEW. There were congratulations all around for the Asian community video production group sponsored by the Association of Chinese Teachers and Chinese for Affirmative Action.

The six-part series of half-hour programs is meant to give Chinese American 8 to 12 year olds a positive group identity through drama, documentary and animation. The first program, shot on location in SF and featuring youngsters from the city schools, chronicles a day in the life of Wei-min, a winsome young immigrant. Wei-min confronts schoolmates who don't at first understand his "funny food" and his cautious parents who don't understand American schooling.

Producer/director Loni Ding told us the programs are meant to provide "glimpses of reality," with Wei-min's after school visit to his mother at work in a garment factory and dialogue artfully combining English with Chinese. The Wei-min episodes were scripted, but "we tried to get the kids to act it out in their own words."

of the voter's handbook), videotapes, and transfer film to video. ("Tape technology is our bag," Esteves explained.)

The center is also interested in purchasing videotapes to expand its collection. Contact Ruth Vastine Russell for details. Keep in mind that the library wants duplication rights.

In addition to serving disabled patrons, the video screening facilities can be used by the general public. That means you.

Walk-in viewing of 3/4" tapes is available at the center's Sacramento Street headquarters or at the Ortega Branch, 3223 Ortega, (681-1848). To view 1/2" tapes, reserve time at the center by calling 558-5034.

The center also stocks more traditional library fare of books and periodicals, including a good selection of video and cablecasting journals (and, of course, the BAVC Study).

Now's the time to take advantage of the services; Esteves said that if Jarvis-Gann passes "this whole operation will go down the tube."